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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE  
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MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director (Intelligence)

SUBJECT: The Problem of Presidential Succession  
in South Korea

### Introduction

The South Korean National Assembly's adoption late last year of a constitutional amendment on presidential succession necessitates re-evaluating the problem of President Rhee's successor.

### Constitutional Provisions for Presidential Succession

The 1954 amendment stipulated that if the office of president becomes vacant, the vice president shall serve out the remainder of the term. A vice presidential vacancy is to be filled by the election of a successor for the unexpired term. Should vacancies occur in both offices a senior cabinet minister, yet to be determined by law, shall become acting president and shall conduct elections for president and vice president within three months.

### Immediate Governmental and Political Reactions

Observers of South Korean politics now generally agree that, when Rhee dies, constitutional forms probably will be followed and that a peaceful and orderly transition of power to the vice president will occur.

Should the presidential office fall vacant prior to August 1956, Vice President Ham Tae-yong would automatically become president. This would create a vice presidential vacancy which must be filled by election. Leading political figures subordinate to Rhee will doubtless concentrate their efforts on securing the vice presidency. The control of this office would be decisive for the winner, enabling him to control Ham's presidential prerogatives and to influence the outcome of the 1956 presidential election through control of the government and party mechanism.

There are some elements of instability in the succession picture. No provisions have been made to determine when the president's incapacitation constitutes a vacancy. Vice President Ham, an elder statesman not involved in governmental or political

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activity, is about 85 years old and is said to be in ill health. He would probably be unable to establish a strong administration except with the support of one of the major contenders for the presidency in 1956. The strong hand of President Rhee would be removed and with it the inhibitions and restraints under which all political leaders have functioned since 1948. Finally, some politicians contend that the 1954 amendment, and a 1952 change substituting popular presidential election for a National Assembly debate, are invalid because they were adopted by illegal procedures. The National Assembly might, therefore, seek to restore the pre-1952 electoral system, although this development probably will not take place as a part of the immediate succession situation.

### The Vice Presidential Contenders

Historically, Rhee has deliberately balanced potential rivals against one another, limited the power of political leaders acting for him, and prevented any individual from emerging as an obvious successor. When Rhee departs, individual leaders in the Liberal party and government organization will endeavor first to gain complete control of that organization and then of the administration, the police and the army under Ham.

At present Yi Ki-pung, chairman of the Liberal party's central committee and speaker of the National Assembly, appears to have the inside track to the presidency. He has enjoyed presidential favor since the 1953 purge of Yi Pom-sok's National Youth Corps (NYC) faction, aspires to be vice president and controls most of the party posts. He also reportedly controls a newly organized, 300,000-man veterans association and appears to be working quite closely with Vice President Ham.

It would be premature, of course, to predict that Yi can maintain his party ascendancy in all circumstances, or that he can hold the ramshackle pro-Rhee organization together after the president departs. Yi's power is primarily a reciprocal of Rhee's favor and support and of the affinity between Madame Rhee and Yi's wife. Yi Ki-pung's continued primacy is as much dependent on political trends up to Rhee's demise as to those developing subsequently.

There are indications that Rhee may believe Yi has overstepped the proper bounds of his authority and at any time the president could, as he has done often in the past, raise counterweights to Yi or remove him completely from power. The imminent government reorganization and the Liberal party's national convention in March will go far to determining Yi's continuing popularity with Rhee.

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The major threat to Yi Ki-pung in the period between Rhee's possible death and the 1956 elections will arise from anti-Yi leaders within the Liberal party and government organization, from the opposition and independents, or from a combination of them. The Yi Kap-song "eldermen's faction" has already broken away from the party, is pressing Rhee to make concessions detrimental to Yi Ki-pung, and is reported to have contacted the NYC with a view toward obtaining its organizational support in 1956. It is possible that an NYC-Yi Kap-song coalition, headed by Yi Kap-song, former NYC leader Yang U-chong, former Prime Minister Paek Tu-chin or Korean Nationalist Party leader Yun Chi-yong may be formed to gird for the 1956 elections. Such a coalition might utilize former NYC chief Yi Pom-sok as a front man; or Yi Pom-sok might assume the leadership himself with the help of these elements.

Finally, there is the possibility that certain legislators eventually would seek to regain the power of presidential election for the National Assembly. In this move opposition and independent forces would take a moral position based on the constitutional prerogatives of the assembly illegally taken away by improper amending processes. They would seek to attract support from elements of the Liberal party and government organization and from the military forces. This development could bring other candidates to the fore, such as Democratic Nationalist party (DNP) leader Cho Pyong-ok, Independent assemblyman Chang Taek-sang and DNP president Sin Ik-hui.

#### The Position of the South Korean Military on the Succession Question

While South Korean army leaders have the capability of interceding in the succession question, the extent of their direct involvement will be influenced significantly by the attitudes of senior United States military authorities. This influence will be balanced by the political ambitions of certain generals and by their estimate of whether or not a succession struggle was leading toward national disaster. Army leaders would probably be less likely to mix actively in politics while the South Korean Army is under operational control of the UN Command than they would if such control reverted to a Korean officer.

South Korean Army Chief of Staff General Chong Il-kwon heads the army's most influential clique and is known to have very strong political ambitions. He has maintained extensive connections with Liberal Party politicians and with several opposition political factions and has developed many sources of funds.

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Chong has successfully appointed loyal officers to a number of key positions. The most important of these is Second Army Commander Lieutenant General Kang Mun-pong, Chong's protégé. This command includes most of South Korean territory south of Seoul and is in a position to control most of the key cities south of the combat zone.

Chong's political ambitions have recently become clear. At the height of the United States' dispute with Rhee over terms of the aid program, Chong made several thinly veiled bids for American support of his presidential ambitions, expressed views which contrasted markedly with Rhee's policies, and on at least one occasion is known to have acknowledged the ambition to become South Korea's next president.

In the event of Rhee's death, however, it appears unlikely that Chong would make an overt bid for power in defiance of the wishes of the United States military authorities.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Yi Hyong-kun has also attempted to build a personal clique in the army. Although Yi's ambition appears great, his principal activity appears to have been directed toward strengthening his position vis-à-vis Chong Il-kwon within the army rather than openly angling for national political power.

General Paek Son-yop, commander of the First Field Army, has manifested little interest in or aptitude for political activity. As the former army Chief of Staff he disliked the political implications of his job and opposed military involvement in politics. It is conceivable, however, that Paek's apolitical qualities might recommend him as a front man for some political grouping.

HUNTINGTON D. SHELDON  
Assistant Director,  
Current Intelligence



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